

The Olympic Ceremonies at Barcelona'92: The vast smorgasbord of media images

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Introduction

The Olympic ceremonies are one of the prime stages for the communicative reality which help us to grasp how one's own and others' cultures are represented. The sociological circumstance is a place, and a unique one, where the diversity of cultures and identities is present at all times. The media cover numerous important international events, from a summit in Europe, Central America, Latin America or Africa, to a war – local or not, which ends up being global or vice-versa – a culture-themed forum, a UN meeting with representatives from its member states, or an international music festival. However, sports have probably been the realm that has best managed to bring together people from diverse communities. We are used to consuming broadcasts of sporting events featuring athletes that represent two lands, such as the last match of the 2009 Champions League in Rome, as well as citizens of several countries, such as the motor racing Grand Prix and the European Athletics Championships.

The Olympics have no doubt become the sports competition that brings together the largest number of men and women, especially men (Hogan 2003), from diverse socio-cultural contexts. In the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, 140 delegations paraded around the track; at the 1996 Games in Atlanta, 197 did; at the 2004 Games in Athens, 202 countries participated; and 203 countries took part in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. This plural participation is precisely what makes the Olympics not only one of the most important elite sports competitions, but also an extraordinary and often unrepeatable showcase of representations of identities and cultures before the local audience from the land that organises the Olympics, and before another international audience.

In this context, the opening and closing ceremonies are showcases where stereotypes, symbols, discourses, strategies and media cultural elements and underpinnings are paraded in a twofold dimension. The first is concocted, articulated and performed by the organising country in its ceremonies and broadcast over an international signal shown on television, while the second is the meaning that this holds for other cultures, which try to explain to their community what is happening and sometimes why it is happening.

The Olympics are a televised spectacle, a necessary object of study for grasping the communication processes defined as global because of both the protagonists of the Olympics and the role of television.

This phenomenon is the backbone of the study entitled “Global Television and the Olympics Games. The experience of Bar-

celona'92"²¹, directed at the Olympic Studies Centre (CEO-UAB) by its director, Professor Miquel de Moragas; by Dr Nancy K. Rivenburgh from the University of Washington in Seattle; and by Dr James F. Larson from the University of Singapore. The main goal of the study was to analyse the role of the planning, production, contents and reception of the Olympics. The most important topics in this study were: the role of television in the evolution of the modern Olympic movement itself; how the nations are represented in the televised spectacle; the implications of television and sponsor rights on the organisation and contents of the television discourse; the international and local reception of the event; the transformations triggered by the innovations in the information and communication technologies; and relations between television, sports and culture prompted by the experience of the Barcelona Olympics. The complexity and scope of this ambitious project became manageable thanks to the extraordinary and pleasant international collaboration of numerous researchers from 26 countries (see Table 1).

Table 1

Main research team

- **From CEO-UAB:** Núria Garcia, Marc Carroggio, Maria Gutiérrez, Muriel Ladrón de Guevara, Gemma Larregola, Nicolás Lorite, Montserrat Llinés, Susanna Ribas, Dolors Aparicio, Carmen Gómez Mont (*Ibero-American University-Mexico*) and Sonia Muñoz (*University of Valle - Colombia*).
- **From the University of Washington:** Kerry Carnahan.

International research correspondents

- **Japan:** Nobuko Kosaka, Hiroshi Matsuyama (*Yomiuri Telecasting Corp*), Andrew Painter.
- **People's Republic of China:** Li Liangrong (*Fudan University*), Kong Xiang-an (*Tianjin Institute of Physical Education*).
- **South Korea:** Park Heung Soo (*Yonsei University*), Kang tae-Young (*KBS broadcast Research Institute*).
- **Republic of Singapore:** Duncan Holaday, Eugenia Peck (*National University of Singapore*).
- **Malaysia:** Ramli Mohamed (*Science University of Malaysia*).
- **Indonesia:** Naswill Idris (*The Indonesian Open Learning University*).
- **France:** Françoise Papa (*Stendhal University*).
- **Germany:** Claus Dieter Rath.
- **United Kingdom:** John Izod, Peter Meech, Tim Thornicroft amb Richard Kilborn (*University of Stirling*).
- **Greece:** Panayote E. Dimitras (*Communication and Political Research Society*).
- **Slovenia:** Slavko Splichal amb Sandra Basic y Breda Luthar (*University of Ljubljana*).
- **United States:** Eric Rothen Buhler (*University of Iowa*).
- **Canada:** Gaëtan Tremblay with M. St-Laurent (*Université du Québec à Montreal*).

21. This project was the author of this text's motivation for working on communication from the realm of research and teaching.

- **Colombia:** Ramiro Arbeláez Ramos (*University of Valle*).
- **Mexico:** Carmen Gómez Mont with Lorena Martín del Campo, Vicente Arancon, Francisco Briseño and Pablo Herranz (*Ibero-American University*)
- **Brazil:** José Marques de Melo with Nanci Laura Loturco Pittelkow (*University of São Paulo*).
- **Cuba:** Enrique González Manet (*Cuban Institute of Radio and Television*).
- **Romania:** Peter Gross with Radu Cosarca and Cristian David (*California State University, Chico*).
- **Russia:** Yassen N. Zassoursky with Svetana Kolesnik and Andrei G. Ritcher (*Moscow University*).
- **Egypt:** Awatef Abd El-Rahman with Ashraf Abd El Mogeith, Fahima Ahmed Gouda, Hani Mohamed, Khalid Salah El Din and Mohamed Houssam El Din (*Cairo University*).
- **Cameroon:** Francis Nguempenye Wete (*University of Yaounde*)
- **Ghana:** Kwame Karikari (*University of Ghana*).
- **South Africa:** Arnold S. de Beer, Elanie Steyn (*University for Christian Higher Education, Potchefstroom*), Daan P. van Vuuren (*SABC*), Eric Louw with Nhalanhla Nkosi (*University of Natal*).
- **Australia:** John Langer (*Victoria University of Technology*)

Source: Moragas, Rivenburgh and Larson 1995, V-VIII.

The study had the support of numerous institutions, including the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the European Commission, The Olympics Museum (Lausanne), the Commission of the European Communities, the Inter-Ministerial Commission on Science and Technology of Spain (CICYT), the Inter-Departmental Commission on Research and Technological Innovation (CIRIT), the Commission for External Affairs of the Government of Catalonia and the University of Washington Graduate School Foundation.

One of the core themes in the research entailed studying the images shown on the television during the broadcast of the opening and closing ceremonies, a phenomenon which is the topic of this chapter. The opening ceremony of any Olympics is transcendently important not only because the audience exceeds that of other sporting events, despite the time zones, but also because the presence of the participating athletes and nations make this event exceptional. The ceremonies are the chance for the host city and nation to present their identity to the world, as expressed by Tomlinson (1996, 583): “The modern Olympic Games, as both a product and promoter of economic, cultural, and political globalization, exemplify tensions between globalism and localism and provide fertile ground for articulations of national identity”.

The communication strategy of the Olympic ceremonies is articulated after outlining the elements that identify the culture of the community hosting the games, based on political and social referents, and also based on other referents that can come from broader cultural settings, such as Mediterranean culture (Moragas 1993). The Olympic Games are officially launched at the opening ceremony, which is planned as a televised spectacle, and this is where the audiovisual discourses of television become an extremely valuable factor.

Knowledge of how stereotypes and other representations generated by the cultural industries are constructed is the core of

a substantial line of research in communication studies. Because of the significance of these elements, the “Global Television and the Olympic Games” project designed its methodological strategy based on two key resources:²² contextual information on the structure of the television system in the sample and on the news generated about the Barcelona'92 Olympics in the different countries, and the different broadcasts of the ceremonies, both opening and closing, in 26 countries, as shown in Table 2.

All the television stations listed above were analysed bearing in mind the following factors: Olympic symbols and values; information on Barcelona and its culture in the broader context; discourses on Catalonia, Spain and Europe; and news on the participating nations, their athletes and the cultural referents of their countries. This analysis entailed a prior exploration that yielded an X-ray of the verbal and visual discourses offered by each of the stations in the sample, as well as a comparative snapshot of the contents broadcasted by Olympic Radio & Television (ORT) and those broadcasted by the television station in the country analysed.

Table 2: List of Olympic ceremonies analysed

Germany: ARD	France: TF1
Australia: Channel 7	Ghana: GBC-TV
Brazil: TV Globo and TV Bandeirantes	Greece: ET1
Cameroon: CRTV	Indonesia: TVRI
Canada: TVA and CTV	Italy: Rai1 and Rai3
China: CCTV	Japan: NHK
Colombia: Cadena A	Malaysia: TV3
South Korea: MBC	Mexico: Canal 13
Cuba: Tele-Rebelde	United Kingdom: BBC
USA: NBC	Romania: RTV
Egypt: ERTU2	Russia: Ostankino 1
Slovenia: 2nd Channel	Singapore: SBC 12
Spain: TVE2 and Canal Olímpic (Catalonia)	South Africa: SABC

Source: Moragas, Rivenburgh and Larson 1995

Obviously, this study meant sifting through the images from the Olympic ceremonies with a detailed description of the performance or theatrical script, an outline of the plans of the broadcaster analysed (including the kind of plan, overprintings and other news elements) and the transcription and translation of the speeches by the hosts and commentators from the stations in the sample. Advertising in the broadcast of the ceremonies shown in the different countries was also an important element

22. The methodological strategy was presented by the author of this chapter in the talk “Analysis methodology of the content and visual transcription of the Olympic ceremonies” at the conference entitled “The Image of Barcelona'92 in World Television” at the College of Journalists of Catalonia on the 28 June 1993.

in the analysis, since it enabled us to detect the presence of the advertising discourse and the different forms and formats in which commercials were inserted into the ceremonies. With this material, an analysis was conducted of the content to detect the following thematic categories: images generated about Catalonia, Spain and Europe; the personalities in the social, political, cultural – or other – life presented in the visual and/or audio discourses of the television stations; an assessment of the television stations in the specific episodes of the theatrical script, such as regarding the *castellers* (human pyramids characteristic of Catalonia), the Mediterranean, the IOC, Olympic values or Europe; and the audiovisual treatment of all the Olympic delegations in the stadium during the opening parade (Moragas, Rivenburgh and Larson 1995). This part of the script of the Olympic ceremonies, the parade of delegations, is precisely a vast smorgasbord of stereotypes of the cultures of the world represented on television.

The methodology attempted to be coherent with the goal of the study and enabled us to obtain complementary quantitative and qualitative results on the construction of identities in relation to culture, television and sports. More specifically, and regarding the preliminary results of the project, we should highlight a variety of publications issued by CEO-UAB on images of Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain and Europe in the Barcelona'92 Olympic Ceremonies and Mediterranean culture in the Barcelona'92 Olympic Games. The contributions on the image of all three areas, Barcelona, Catalonia and Spain, were examined through the prism of four factors, including the international interpretation of the identities and their relations with other cultures, the position regarding Catalonia's uniqueness, the specific image of the city of Barcelona, and international interest in the culture of the host. The results on the image of Europe are articulated based on the idea of Europe in the official scripts of both ceremonies, the audiovisual discourses of two segments of the ceremonies ("Ode to Joy" and "The *Castellers*") and other references to 'Europe' in the audiovisual contents of the Olympics. Finally, the relationship between the Barcelona'92 Olympics and Mediterranean culture was examined based on the theatrical performances during the opening and closing ceremonies.

Attention to the televised contents during numerous segments, such as the entry of the flags into the stadium and the Catalan and Spanish anthems, the ballad of the *sardana* dances and the performance of the *castellers*, were the subjects of three reports on the meanings that the television commentators assigned to the performance. The construction of Catalan identity through this event was a clear point of research, as very clearly revealed in the article published in the magazine *El temps* entitled "In Catalonia, of course". Also worth noting is the transfer of knowledge through this project in the field of education, since some of the conclusions from the study served as the groundwork for a range of university teaching materials. One example was the production of a university educational television programme on the Olympics broadcast via satellite to all the universities in the state of Georgia. The titles from the audiovisual production include: "Olympic Television Production for Barcelona'92", "Olympic Advertising at the Barcelona '92 Ceremonies", "Symbols of Peace in Olympic Ceremonies" and "Impact of the 1992 Olympic Games on the City of Barcelona".

The main goal of the study discussed in this text was to gain further knowledge of the construction of Catalan identity based on a televised spectacle, namely the Olympic ceremonies. Furthermore, as mentioned at the start of this text, the narrative discourses of the journalists from television stations around the world assigned meaning to the identity of the other through their own culture.

Conclusions of the study²³

In the comparative analysis of the 28 opening and closing ceremonies of the Barcelona Olympic Games, two issues stand out. The first is the prominent role played by the Organising Committee for the Barcelona Olympic Games, COOB'92, in creating the representations of the concept of the Olympics, Barcelona, Catalonia and Spain. The second is the fact that the different cultures and referential frameworks largely determined the interpretation that the television stations analysed in the

23. The next section contains some of the conclusions mentioned in the book *Television in the Olympics* (1995: 244-249).

study conveyed to their audiences. The television stations that broadcast the institutional signal of the Olympics somehow reinterpreted what they saw for their audiences, becoming the constructors of a new meaning. This is true of the fireworks display in the Olympic opening ceremony, in which the German television station ZDF found similarities with the bombs falling over the city of Sarajevo, while the Singapore-based television station SBC 12 interpreted the pyrotechnics display as a questionable extravagance. In Cameroon, in turn, the fireworks were interpreted as a symbol of the wealth of the city of Barcelona (Moragas, Rivenburgh and Larson 1995, 244-245).

However, what is striking is the fact that the Olympic values and symbols were barely mentioned in many broadcasts, and they were in fact nonexistent in a small number of them. However, 'participation' and 'peace' stood out, along with 'friendship', as the most prevalent values portrayed. In the negotiations with the television stations after these Olympic Games, the stations' commitment to these values was included as an important qualitative value when granting a given operator television rights for the Olympics.

All of these issues only serve to highlight the fact that certain discourses are beyond the control of the Olympic organisers. This phenomenon reveals the need to keep showing how the different television stations adapt their institutional signal and their role as intermediators between the Olympic Games and the audiences. In the study, we noted how the Olympic commentators often served as interpreters, observers and even referees of this mega-event (Moragas, Rivenburgh and Larson 1995, 245-247). Another prominent factor in relation to the audiences is how the different television stations secured large, sustained audiences for the Olympics using live broadcasts and the excitement they transmitted, as well as the interest in a handful of universal sports stars coupled with the audiences' attraction to the local stars from each country.

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